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**ADELAIDE  
FESTIVAL**

## EDUCATION RESOURCE

Resource developed by  
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ADELAIDE  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



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# Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream

An opera by Benjamin Britten



# A Midsummer Night's Dream

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## Rundown on the show

Benjamin Britten's musical transformation of Shakespeare's most loved comedy is something of a miracle: apart from a single short sentence, every word is that of England's finest poet; every fibre and comic nuance of the play is preserved.

And while a lesser composer might have merely adorned a masterpiece, he created a new one of his own: with its graceful haunting melodies, iridescent orchestration, headily perfumed harmony, and filigree-like vocal textures - there's nothing in the repertoire like it.

Neil Armfield's special affinity with Britten's operas has been lauded worldwide. 'Definitive' and 'staggering' was the UK and US critical consensus for his multi-award-winning *Billy Budd* and audiences lucky enough to have experienced his *Peter Grimes* and *The Turn of the Screw* rate them just as highly. Despite its proudly Australian creative team, this missing piece of the puzzle has been seen abroad but never at home.

At the heart of Shakespeare's most magical and popular plays, and one of the most successful adaptations in the operatic canon, is the relationship between Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the Fairies and because of a fight between them, the world is out of sync.

Layered into that is the world of the mechanicals led by sweet Bully Bottom who are putting on a play in the woods.

Mixed in with that are the pairs of young lovers, wrong person gets wrong person, gets wrong person, until eventually all is reconciled.

*"It is an opera of beauty and of joy and it's very much about reconciliation and magic...  
"it's the perfect work to cheer us up and to remind us of the beauty of the world, the beauty of the imagination and the beauty of making theatre."*

Neil Armfield – Director and Adelaide Festival Joint Artistic Director

### Themes

- the magical power of love to transform our lives
- a reminder about love's excesses and foolishness
- the violence often perpetrated in the name of lust
- the duality between fantasy and reality

### Production

#### Style and conventions

#### OPERA

**Noun:** a drama set to music and made up of vocal pieces with orchestral accompaniment and orchestral overtures

Opera as an art form is nearly as old as Shakespeare. The first noted performance was in 1598 in Florence, only a few years after *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. In the 17th Century Henry Purcell became widely regarded as the first great British composer of operas – including *The Fairy Queen*, his own loose adaptation of *Midsummer*.

#### Music and sound

**Oberon, Tytania and the chorus of children** – the supernatural world of the fairies is characterised by high-pitched voices: counter-tenor, coloratura soprano and boy trebles.

**Puck** – he speaks his lines rather than singing them. However, he is given a musical 'voice' by associating him with a motif on the D trumpet.

**The Rude Mechanicals/The Rustics** – their voices are at the opposite end of the vocal spectrum to the fairies.

**The Lovers** – they sing in even notes, syllable to syllable with the quartet usually accompanied by a conventional combination of strings and wind.



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### Characters

- Tytania, Queen of the Fairies
- Oberon, King of the Fairies

### The Fairies

- Cobweb
- Mustardseed
- Moth
- Peaseblossom
- Puck

### The Lovers

- Hermia
- Lysander
- Demetrius
- Helena
- Theseus
- Hippolyta

### The Rude Mechanicals/ The Rustics

- Bottom, a weaver
- Flute, a bellow mender
- Snout, a tinker
- Quince, a carpenter
- Starveling, a tailor

### Coloratura soprano:

Operatic soprano voice that specialises in music that is distinguished by agile runs, leaps and trills.

Merriam-Webster dictionary

### The D Trumpet

The D Trumpet serves as a note-addition to other traditional brass instruments. Many famous composers, including Ravel and Stravinsky wrote masterpieces with parts specifically for the D trumpet.

*"If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear..."*

Puck, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Britten and Pears only added one line, which was included to make sense of the plot after all the cuts: Lysander's 'compelling thee to marry with Demetrius', delivered to Hermia.



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## Curriculum links and activities

This education resource has been developed with links to the Australian Curriculum. Activities have been created to reflect each of the achievement standards, depending on the year level, including content descriptions within each learning area and the general capabilities. The resource aims to provide teachers with information to help prepare students before attending the performance, as well as structured learning activities for the classroom after viewing the performance.

**General Capabilities – specific learning activities are linked with the following icons:**



Literacy



Ethical understanding



Numeracy



Personal and  
social capability



Critical and  
creative thinking



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## Year 7 and 8 Band Description - Drama

- use focus, tension, space and time to enhance drama
- shape drama for audiences using narrative and non-narrative dramatic forms and production elements
- explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements including voice, movement, situation, space and time, and tension as they make and respond to drama
- consider social, cultural and historical influences of drama
- build on their understanding from previous bands of the roles of artists and audiences as they engage with more diverse performances

## Year 7 and 8 Band Description Music

- build on their aural skills by identifying and manipulating rhythm, pitch, dynamics and expression, form and structure, timbre and texture in their listening, composing and performing
- evaluate the expressive techniques used in music they listen to and experience in performance

### Content Description

#### Year 7 and 8

Analyse how the elements of drama have been combined in devised and scripted drama to convey different forms, performance styles and dramatic meaning. ACADRR045

Perform devised and scripted drama maintaining commitment to role. ACADRM044

Identify and connect specific features and purposes of drama from contemporary and past times to explore viewpoints and enrich their drama making. ACADRR046

#### Achievement Standards

By the end of Year 8, students identify and analyse how the elements of drama are used, combined and manipulated in different styles. They apply this knowledge in drama they make and perform. They evaluate how they and others from different cultures, times and places.

### Content Description

#### Year 7 and 8

Analyse composers' use of the elements of music and stylistic features when listening to and interpreting music. ACAMUR097

#### Achievement Standards

Students identify and analyse how the elements of music are used in different styles and apply this knowledge in their performances and compositions. They evaluate musical choices they and others from different cultures, times and places make to communicate meaning as performers and composers.



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## Year 9 and 10 Band Description: Drama

- refine and extend their understanding and use of role, character, relationships and situation
- extend the use of voice and movement to sustain belief in character
- draw on drama from a range of cultures, times and locations as they experience drama
- learn that over time there has been further development of different traditional and contemporary styles of drama and that dramatists can be identified through the style of their work, as they explore drama forms
- explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements, and social, cultural and historical influences of drama as they make and respond to drama
- evaluate actors' success in expressing the directors' intentions and the use of expressive skills in drama they view and perform
- build on their understanding from previous bands of the roles of artists and audiences as they engage with more diverse performances

## Year 9 and 10 Band Description: Music

- explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements, and social, cultural and historical contexts of music as they make and respond to music
- evaluate performers' success in expressing the composers' intentions and expressive skills in music they listen to and perform

## SACE Stage 1 and 2

SACE Stage 1 and 2 – the resources are created with links and in relation to the subject outlines.

### Content Description Year 9 and 10

Perform devised and scripted drama making deliberate artistic choices and shaping design elements to unify dramatic meaning for an audience. ACADRM051

Analyse a range of drama from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their drama making. ACADRR053

### Achievement Standards

By the end of Year 10, students analyse the elements of drama, forms and performance styles and evaluate meaning and aesthetic effect in drama they devise, interpret, perform and view. They use their experiences of drama practices from different cultures, places and times to evaluate drama from different viewpoints.

### Content Description Year 7 and 8

Analyse a range of music from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their music making, starting with Australian music, including music of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and consider music in international contexts. ACAMUR105

### Achievement Standards

Students analyse different scores and performances aurally and visually. They evaluate the use of elements of music and defining characteristics from different musical styles. They use their understanding of music making in different cultures, times and places to inform and shape their interpretations, performances and compositions.



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## Theatre etiquette

The French word etiquette, and its meaning, was adopted by English speakers in the middle of the 18th Century – 'requirements for proper behaviour'. This can sound a bit formal but having an understanding of 'theatre etiquette' helps an audience understand what to expect and how to get the most out of their theatre experience.

Depending on the age of an audience the expectations can vary. Theatre designed for very young audiences will have different expectations. Often the theatre experience for younger audiences will invite and encourage participation. However, as the content becomes more complex and audiences mature, there is an expectation that students will have developed an understanding of the difference between enthusiastic participation and thoughtless disruption.

### Whole class discussion

Why does it matter?

- Talk about sharing the space and respecting other audience members attending the performance.
- Discuss the shared role of audience and performer, each is dependent on the other to ensure a great performance. Don't forget – you can see them, and they can see you!
- As a class exercise compile a list of all the roles and tasks it takes to bring a live performance to the stage.

### What makes going to a live performance different to going to the cinema?

Many audience members have probably been to see a movie but might not have been to a live theatre performance. The BIG difference is that the performers are live and are there with you in the moment. Discuss accepted ways of showing appreciation. If it's funny, it's okay to laugh. If the performers invite responses, then it's okay to respond. Sometimes it can also be sad so if you know it's going to be sad don't forget to bring a tissue or two. There is no right or wrong response to a live performance.

### Theatre protocols to share with students

When you arrive:

- Go to the toilet before you go into the theatre.
- An usher will help you find your seat and you need to follow their directions.
- Turn off your mobile phone.

When the lights go down:

- This is a sign the performance is about to start. It is time to end chats and be quiet.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- No eating in the theatre. Only water bottles are allowed.

Photographing and filming is not permitted because:

- It can disturb the actors on the stage and break their concentration.
- Intellectual property is paramount. The production on stage is the intellectual property of the theatre company therefore no photographs or filming is allowed.
- You will be missing out on the detail you can't see through the viewfinder.



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## Five broad groups of children whose responses as audience are characterised as:

### Technicians

Children who are more interested in the technology than the performance, deconstructing the performance techniques employed in the show.

### Narrators

Children who talk through the performance, asking questions, commenting on actions.

### Dramatists

Children who immediately imitate what they see, participating through their own actions.

### Mystics

Children who are completely engrossed in the sensory aspects of the experience.

### Spectators

Children who hover around the edges, playing with whatever they can find, apparently not engaged, but often able afterwards to recall what they saw.

## How many of your students fit into these categories?

*Weddell, C (2003) The child audience. In S. Wright (Ed.) Children, meaning making and the arts. Australia: Pearson*

### Extension Activity

Individually or in small groups, students construct a book to tell a story about going to the theatre.



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## Performance literacy

Art is a means of expressing emotion, a way of transmitting feelings, culture, beliefs and values between the creators and performers of the work and the audience or viewers. There is some art, which is created for the explicit purpose of eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience. There are a myriad of emotions that students can experience when they are viewing live theatre, a performance or an art installation from happiness to anger, surprise, annoyance, anger, just to name a few.

As students engage with and view live theatre, performances and installations they develop a deeper understanding of the language of performance art. They develop literacies allowing them to 'read' the gestures and movements of a performer, develop an understanding of the intention of the set, costume, or lighting designer, or reflect on what the playwright, directors and artists' intended meaning is of a setting or character or what an artist is communicating in an installation.

The **Before the Show** activities, for the Adelaide Festival show you are attending, are designed to support students to develop these literacy skills, knowledge and understanding.

The **After the Show** activities are designed to provide students with the opportunity to discuss, analyse and comprehend their responses to the show. Having a strong knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology will support students.

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## Historical context

Share information with students about the life and times of William Shakespeare.

### William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April, 1564 and died 23 April 1616 in Stratford. He grew up at the end of the Elizabethan Age, in the Tudor era during the reign of King James I. Having an understanding of the historical context and the events that occurred during Shakespeare's life can provides an insight and understanding of the plays he wrote.

The Elizabethan age (late 16th and early 17th century) is also regarded as the Renaissance period in England, with writers such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, Sir Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Sir Philip Sidney and John Milton, architects such as Inigo Jones, and composers Thomas Tallis, John Taverner and William Byrd.

Many people during the era found enjoyment from watching plays. Not many people were able to read or write so plays were a way of learning about important events. Theatres were also a distraction from everyday life and the sickness and death that infiltrated London and surrounding parishes.

Shakespeare lived his whole life in the shadow of the outbreaks and deaths from the plague. There were particularly severe outbreaks of plague in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, and 1608-09. London was also ravaged by smallpox, syphilis, typhus and malaria with the average life expectancy at 35 years.

When deaths from the plague were greater than 30/week the London authorities closed theaters.

**1588 – 1613** Shakespeare wrote 37 or more plays. He also wrote several 'Ovidian' poems and is well known for his sonnet sequence written in the early 1590's, composed of 154 interconnected sonnets dealing with controversial issues.

During the period from 1606 - 1610 when Shakespeare wrote and produced *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* the London theatres were probably only open for a total of nine months.

The plays he created often show an awareness of how precarious life can be in the face of infection, contamination, death and social breakdown. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the letter about Juliet's plan to pretend to have died does not reach Romeo because the messenger is forced into quarantine. The word quarantine is a word we have all become familiar with since the beginning of 2020 and COVID.



The Cobbe portrait (1610), The Chandos portrait (early 1600s) and the Droeshout portrait (1622); three of the most prominent of the reputed portraits of William Shakespeare.

Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portraits\\_of\\_Shakespeare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portraits_of_Shakespeare)

<b>1563 – 1564</b>	London's worst episode of plague during the 16th century. Approximately 21 000 people were recorded to have died of plague during the outbreak.
<b>1592 – 1593</b>	London experienced its last major outbreak of the 16th century. Approximately 15 000 people died in the city of London and another 4 900 died in the surrounding parishes.
<b>1603 – 1611</b>	1603 – 36 000 people died in London of the plague, which was said to be imported from Ostend, on the Belgian coast.  Over time from 1603 – 1611 approximately 46 000 in London and surrounding parishes died from the plague.



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## Enter - A Midsummer Night's Dream

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's most famous and well-known comedies. The social norms of the day around courtly love and ethics influenced Shakespeare's writing of this play. It reflects the norms of this time where marriages, especially between nobles, were often forced upon young women with the threat of death or being sent to an abbey if they refused to marry or failed in their wifely duties. Shakespeare also drew on Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* in order to create the play.

Shakespeare challenged the notion of the patriarchal society - he placed the relationships in the fanciful setting of the fairy world - the dream world where relationships are mended.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, features many relationships that will provide students with areas for discussion regarding not only social status and inequality but also sexism and gender roles.

*"...women's struggle against patriarchal values and the 'high cost' of these values appear frequently throughout many of Shakespeare's plays."*

Swift Lenz, Carolyn Ruth, et al., editors. *The Woman's Part. Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. University of Illinois Press, 1980.

*"Going to find a barefoot brother out.  
One of our order, to associate me,  
Here in this city visiting the sick,  
And finding him, the searchers of the town,  
Suspecting that we both were in a house  
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,  
Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth,  
So that my speed to Mantua there was stayed."*

Shakespeare - *Romeo and Juliet*



Dan Rest/Lyric Opera of Chicago

### Written and published

The comedy is written about 1596-96 and published in 1600 in quarto edition from the author's manuscript.



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## Crazy Times – the pandemic and beyond

Fast forward 401 years from 1620 to 2021 to the staging of Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Adelaide Festival. Just like in Shakespeare's times the pandemic of 2020 has had a significant impact on the performing arts worldwide. Many artists have turned to digital platforms to reach out to audiences when theatres started to close.

Our personalities and relationships have been shaped and changed by our experiences and interactions during this crazy time. Lockdown, isolation, physical distancing and the whole idea of the pandemic put a halt to 'normal' life.

Whether it's lockdown, shutdown, isolation, circuit breaker – everyone has their own personal experience of this pandemic. Every story is different.

### Individually:

As students watch the video/s they should write down their ideas in response to the following questions:

- What were the key moments for you?
- What impact did the piece have on you?
- What did it make you think?
- What did it make you wonder?
- What were their connections to the story?

### Working with a partner:

Share your notes:

- What similarities and differences did you have?

Students join with another pair and share their observations of similarities and difference.

### Individually:

- Students write a paragraph about their experiences of the pandemic.
- Discuss with students the many ways they could present their stories. Could it be through:
  - dance
  - monologue
  - poetry
  - group piece
  - film
- Students review what they have written and decide how they will present their stories
- Rehearse and prepare
- Present



### Scenes for Survival

Scenes for Survival is a new season of digital short artworks, created in association with BBC Scotland, Screen Scotland, BBC Arts' Culture in Quarantine project and Scotland's leading theatre venues and companies, with support from Hopscotch Films.

[nationaltheatrescotland.com](http://nationaltheatrescotland.com)

The short films take the viewer on a journey exploring lockdown life, love, loneliness, and survival.

### Here are a couple to get you started

[Call to adventure](#)

Will today be the day Mark finally has the guts to say how he really feels?

[The Theatre Makers Credo](#)

An uplifting manifesto on the art of theatre-making. It's all about the story.



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## Looking after students' self-disclosure

Discussing personal experiences in relation to COVID-19 may raise content that could be personal and upsetting. It could include dealing with topics such as violence, racism, family dynamics, mental health. Some students may bring valuable real life experiences to the discussions. However, appropriate boundaries need to be set for sharing information.

It is important students think about the experiences they are sharing and consider:

- Will talking about these experience produce emotions they are not ready to experience?
- Is it a problem if this information is shared outside of the classroom?



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## Time Traveller

Now - go back 60 years from 2020 to 11 June 1960 to the world premiere of Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival, conducted by the composer, directed by the choreographer John Cranko, with set and costume designs by Carl Toms.

*"Britten has taken for his libretto his and Peter Pears's own version of Shakespeare, a version which omits little and which is in itself delightful, and a splendid foundation. And he has written to it music of such originality, charm and invention that, almost every second or two, one feels grateful for it, enchanted by it, almost transported to another world by its magical evocative qualities in creating atmosphere that varies from moment to moment."*

Review 1960 <https://www.jennifervvyan.org/repertoire/benjamin-britten/>

It is interesting to note that Britten usually took about several years to write an opera but *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, from concept to stage, was completed in under a year. Britten and Pears adapted their libretto from Shakespeare's text with heavy editing.

Britten described the process, "to get it into manageable shape, which basically entailed simplifying and cutting an extremely complex story...I do not feel in the least guilty at having cut the play in half. The original Shakespeare will survive."

1960 marks the end of another pandemic.

The global influenza pandemic of 1957 - 1959 affected 39 countries in Europe, England, the Asia-Pacific region, and the Americas.



Review of the premiere of Britten's Opera [jennifervvyan.org](https://www.jennifervvyan.org)



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## Gender equality

Many of the discussions of Britten's opera look at the subtle changes he makes regarding gender roles. Where Shakespeare's work was a critique on the power structures within patriarchal structures, Britten's approach is subtle. His focus on the woods and the fairy world moves the concepts and power structures of masculinity and femininity. These changes in the power structures can be seen in:

- the males serving a female
- the use of a countertenor\* for Oberon – not as an association of unmanliness in a powerless role – but a powerful man as a pro-feminist.

In Shakespeare's text only the men and Hippolyta were allowed to comment, in Britten's opera their lines are distributed more equally with the female roles.

Between the lovers, male bonds are now seen as strong as female ones and female opinions carry the same weight as those given by men.



*\*A countertenor (also contra tenor) is a type of classical male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of the female contralto or mezzo-soprano voice types, generally extending from around G3 to D5 or E5.*

**A libretto** - the words which are set to music to make an opera.

libretto – from Italian meaning “little book”.

**Coloratura** - elaborate ornamentation of a vocal melody, especially in operatic singing.

*Oxford Languages*

**Timbre** - (mid-19th century) the character or quality of a musical sound or voice as distinct from its pitch and intensity.

*Oxford Languages*

## Putting it all together

### Working with a partner:

Each student will need a copy of the information that compares and contrasts the structure of Shakespeare's and Britten's – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

- locate and identify the similarities and differences in each
- think about and discuss if they think the structures change the story

### Pair share:

- Pairs group with another pair and discuss their observations.

### As a whole class:

- Discuss the similarities and the differences the groups have observed.

Image credit Michael Cooper



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## Let the music begin

### Working individually:

- For 1 minute each student writes everything they know about opera.
- Turn to the person behind you and share what you have written.

NOTE: If students don't know what to write prompt them with the following questions:

- Has anyone seen an opera?
- What do they sound like?
- Do they all sound the same?
- What do they look like?

Britten had an amazing ability to write descriptive music to project ideas, thoughts, and emotions in a way that words cannot.

Each student will need a copy of the information that looks at the voices and instruments associated with each of the characters.

As a whole class discuss what everyday connections they have to the sounds and instruments Britten has used for the characters.

### Working in a group of five:

Students negotiate the tasks each of them research and gather the information about: What is an opera, the singers in an opera and the musical instruments in an orchestra.

The group will also decide how they will present the information.

1. Research and write a definition of what is an opera.
2. Research and write a definition of the following voices in an opera:
  - mezzo-soprano
  - tenor
  - countertenor
  - baritone
  - treble
  - soprano
  - bass
  - contralto
  - bass baritone

3. Research and write a definition of the following instruments found in the orchestra for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

### Strings

violins  
violas  
cellos  
double bass

### Woodwinds

Flute  
Piccolo flute  
Oboe  
Clarinet  
Bassoon

### Brass

Horn  
Trumpet in D  
Trombone

Harp

Harpsichord

### Percussion

Timpani  
Triangle  
Cymbals  
Gong  
Wood blocks  
Vibraphone  
Glockenspiel  
Xylophone  
Tamburo  
Snare, Tenor  
and bass drum

### Stage Band

Sopranino recorders  
played by the children

Groups should prepare their information to share as:

- poster presentation
- video
- oral presentation



# A Midsummer Night's Dream

EDUCATION  
RESOURCE

## CONTENTS

## RUNDOWN ON THE SHOW

## THEMES, PRODUCTION & CURRICULUM

## BEFORE THE SHOW

## AFTER THE SHOW

## MEET THE COMPANY

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



## Write your own opera

### Working in small groups

Students return to the pandemic stories they have written and:

- Choose one or more of the stories that have been written to perform as an opera (Keep the story short)
- Write a libretto (the storyline, lyrics and dramatic direction of your opera), think of it as a screenplay or script for music.

Make decisions and complete sketches and information about:

- The scenery
- Costumes + make up
- What the music will be like

NOTE: Advise students to keep their productions simple and use electronic scores and keep the costumes and sets simple.



Groups should begin the rehearsal of their opera.

### STAGE 2 – Drama

#### Knowledge and Understanding

KU2 – Understanding and evaluation of the artistic and cultural value of local, global, contemporary, and/or historical drama.

#### Critical and Creative Thinking

CCT1 – Creative thinking and experimentation in the development of dramatic ideas.

CCT2 – Analysis and evaluation of the student's own drama-making and others' dramatic works, styles, and/or events.

#### Creative Application

CA1 – Application of dramatic processes, individually and in collaboration with others.

CA2 – Application of dramatic skills.

CA3 – Integration of theory and practice to make meaningful dramatic outcomes.

## Integrating the feedback and preparing for performance or filming

Students discuss and consider feedback:

- Making changes if necessary.
- Rehearse and ensure each scene transitions smoothly from one scene to the next and that tension and rhythm are sustained.
- Video a full run through, watch it back as an ensemble and critique where any further changes should take place.

Image credit Michael Cooper



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## After the show

Individually students write responses to the following questions:

- How did they feel at the end of the production?
- What moment in the production had the most impact on them and why?
- Would they make any changes to their definition of opera?
- What impact did the costuming and set have on telling the story?
- How did the instruments the orchestra played add to the story
- Are there questions you have you would like to ask the director? What are they?
- What changes would you make to the staging of this opera?



### Reviewing the show

#### Writing a critical response to the performance

Drama is a dynamic practice and responding to live theatre supports students to become better dramatic artists. Links are provided to a number of resources to support students to write a review and response to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The questions and reflections students have undertaken prior to writing their review will support them to use the framework.



**NOTE:** Encouraging students to consider why they felt the show or individual scenes were "hilarious", "surprising", "boring" or "suspenseful" is a crucial step in learning how to interrogate their 'gut' responses and apply reasoning, evidence and judgement when critically analysing a work.

A framework to support students to plan and develop their critical responses is provided.

### Refining their opera

Students should return to their initial groups to discuss their opera based on their experience of seeing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- What could they change?
- What could they keep the same?
- What could they add?
- What could they remove?

Based on their discussion they should refine and rehearse their devised piece in preparation for a performance.

Students can use any of the following forms to demonstrate the way they have understood, analysed and evaluated the work:

- A video recorded oral presentation
- A mini documentary
- A video essay/an annotated multimedia presentation
- A vlog
- Video excerpts of rehearsal and performance
- A video diary



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## Meet the Company

A co-production of Houston Grand Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera and Canadian Opera Company, presented by Adelaide Festival in association with Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

Composer **Benjamin Britten**

Libretto **Benjamin Britten** and **Peter Pears** after **Shakespeare**

Directed by **Neil Armfield**

Set and Costume Design **Dale Ferguson**

Choreographer/Associate Director **Denni Sayers**

Lighting Designer **Damien Cooper**

The Fairies

**Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen** as Oberon

**Rachelle Durkin** as Tytania

**Mark Coles Smith** as Puck

**Daniel Milton** as Mustardseed

**Jonathan Siow** as Moth

**Eliza Brill Reed** as Cobweb

**Luca Shin** as Peaseblossom

The Lovers

**Teddy Tahu Rhodes** as Theseus

**Fiona Campbell** as Hippolyta

**Andrew Goodwin** as Lysander

**Sally-Anne Russell** as Hermia

**James Clayton** as Demetrius

**Leanne Kenneally** as Helena

The Rude Mechanicals/The Rustics

**Warwick Fyfe** as Bottom

**Kanen Breen** as Flute

**Douglas McNicol** as Quince

**Pelham Andrews** as Snug

**Norbert Hohl** as Snout

**Jeremy Tatchell** as Starveling

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra

Conductor **Paul Kildea**

Associate Conductor **Brett Weymark**

Young Adelaide Voices

Director **Christie Anderson**

The presentation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been made possible by the Adelaide Festival Chairman's Circle, the Adelaide Festival Opera Donor Circle (Leading Patron Maureen Wheeler AO) and MM Electrical.

Sally-Anne Russell's and Teddy Tahu Rhodes' performances are supported by Peter McKee and Pamela McKee.



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## Additional Resources

[Playing A Midsummer Night's Dream: Reinventing Gender in Henry Purcell's The Fairy Queen and Benjamin Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) Marloes van Stormbroek

[Preparing the Role of Tytania in Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Handbook for Singers](#) by Emma Petteimerides

[Opera 101 – A Midsummer Night's Dream – an Opera](#) by Benjamin Britten.

[Message, Meaning and Code in the Operas of Benjamin Britten](#) – by James Conlon

[A Midsummer Night's Dream – Benjamin Britten](#) - by Paul Thomason

[Benjamin Britten: A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) - by Georg Predota

[A Midsummer Night's Dream: Libretto Vs Script](#)

[A Midsummer Night's Dream Libretto](#) - by Neil Armfield

[Review: A Midsummer Night's Dream/Lyric Opera](#) - by Brian Hieggelke

[A Midsummer Night's Dream – an Opera](#) - by Tom Williams

[These foolish mortals are back, courtesy of Britten and the Bard.](#) - by John von Rhein

[The Wall Street Journal](#) - by Heidi Waleson

[Now Toronto](#) - by Glen Sumi

[The Dream is all about the music](#) - by Everett Evan

[InDaily](#)



# Guide for Writing a Critical Response to an Opera

- Was this the first time you attended an Opera?
- Is it a piece you would like to hear again?

## Opening Paragraph

When	
What Opera title: Composer: Original performance: Librettist: Presenting Organisation: Conductor: Orchestra: :	
Where Theatre: Ambience, acoustics, distance from the stage	
Plot Give a brief synopsis of the plot. Do not give every details of the story, but summarise each act	

### Language Features:

- Usually in past tense
- Uses subject-specific language
- Descriptive language
- Third person voice
- Analytical language
- Modality (how certain we are about something)
- Cast and crew referred to by their full names or last name

## 1st Paragraph - Who

How theatrical elements are communicated.  In this particular production, do you think the vocal, visual and dramatic aspects of performance were well balanced?	
Did you like the singing of the principal performers?  What did you observe on each of the principals?	
Discuss how they engaged the audience – movement, voice	
Give examples	

## 2nd Paragraph - What else

Name and comment on some of the arias?	
What did you think of the performance of the chorus?	

# Guide for Writing a Critical Response to an Opera

## 3rd Paragraph - Technical aspects

Describes a key moment or scene from the production.	
How were sets, lights, props and costumes used to communicate meaning to the audience?	
Was the set attractive or appropriate to the opera in your opinion?	
What was most outstanding to you in regards to – music, direction, sets, costumes, lighting.	

## Concluding Paragraph - Summarises the viewers opinion

Your overall thoughts about the production. <b>Note:</b> This is not a rating of the production.	
What made it stand out?	
What did it make you think?	
Was the direction imaginative and appropriate to the story?	

# How Britten uses voice type and key to tell the story

Individual characters and groups of characters can be recognised by their own particular musical themes and keys.

Britten's music is thus essential in telling a story that – intentionally or not – offers imagined alternatives to the constructions of patriarchal societies.

Britten avoids traditional harmony and meter and incorporates atonal and ametrical musical lines.

The lovers' scenes - C major, its dominant G major and its parallel C minor – frequently appear in their scenes.

Character	Voice Type	Key	Musical Instrument
Tytania, Queen of the Fairies	coloratura soprano	Frequently - F-sharp major and minor When she is under the spell - E-flat	Harp and flutes
Oberon, King of the Fairies	countertenor Written for a very high male voice sung in falsetto	E-flat	

## The fairies

An ethereal sound  
F-sharp major and minor  
High woodwinds

Cobweb	treble		
Mustardseed	treble		
Moth	treble		
Peaseblossom	treble		
Puck	speaking role	Does not sing	Tumbling trumpet melodies

### **The lovers**

A more romantic sound

They have three keys that reappear frequently throughout their scenes:

C major, its dominant G major and its parallel C minor

Hermia	mezzo-soprano	Mostly A major	
Lysander	tenor		
Demetrius	baritone		
Helena	soprano		
Theseus	bass		
Hippolyta	contralto		

### **The mechanicals**

"Simple" music

Bottom, a weaver	bass-baritone	heavy and rough - singing a melody that jumps around in both notes and rhythms "very loudly"	low and loud instruments
Lysander	tenor		
Demetrius	baritone		
Helena	soprano		
Theseus	bass		
Hippolyta	contralto		

# A Midsummer Night's Dream

### A changeling

Historically referred to as an *auf* or *oaf*, is a human-like creature found in folklore and folk religion throughout Europe. A changeling was believed to be a fairy child that had been left in place of a human child stolen by the fairies.

### Shakespeare's plot structure

Written in 1595 or 1596 – the exact date remains unknown.

The pursuit of well-matched love and the struggle to achieve it drives the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### The play consists of four interconnecting plots.

The plots are connected by the preparation of the celebration of the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta – set under the light of the moon in the woodland.

### Act I – Scene 1

Egeus arrives with his daughter Hermia for the wedding, along with Lysander and Demetrius. Hermia and Lysander love each other but Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius. Helena, Hermia's friend loves Demetrius. Egeus seeks Theseus' intervention. Theseus insists Egeus must have his way, and gives Hermia a month to marry Demetrius. If she doesn't she will either die or become a nun.

Hermia and Lysander decide to elope and meet in the forest.

Hermia tells Helena of her plan.

Helena tells Demetrius of Hermia's plan – hoping he will like her more. Demetrius chases after Hermia and Helena chases after Demetrius.

### Britten's opera structure

Adapted by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears and written in 1960.

Britten notes that '*the sung word takes so much longer than the spoken word*' (The Britten Companion – Palmer, C 1984).

About half of Shakespeare's text had to be cut in order to create a libretto Britten could set music to.

Britten changed the name of Titania to Tytania and The Mechanicals to The Rustics.

### Britten and Pears reworked Shakespeare's play into a three act structure.

### Act I

Oberon, the King of the Fairies and Tytania, his queen are quarrelling over a young changeling boy that Tytania has stolen. She refuses to give him up.

Oberon sends Puck, his servant to find a magic flower and sprinkle the juice on Tytania's eyelids. The magic happens - when she awakens she will fall in love with the first person she sees. Oberon plans to steal the boy while she is under the spell.

Lysander and Hermia have decided to elope to the forest to escape the laws of the city forcing Hermia to obey her father's request to marry Demetrius.

Demetrius who loves Hermia chases after her followed by Helena chasing after Demetrius, who she loves.

## Act I – Scene 2

Meanwhile - The Mechanicals meet to discuss a play on the theme of Pyramus and Thisbe they want to perform at Theseus' wedding. They plan to rehearse in the forest. (Shakespeare weaves this plot thread throughout the play so that the bumbling attempt of this group to rehearse a high tragedy unfolds against the backdrop of the play's tangle of confusion.)

The six characters who are the mechanicals are: Nick Bottom, Peter Quince, Francis Flute, Robin Starveling, Tom Snout and Snug.

## Act II – Scene 1

Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the fairies, are arguing over who should have a changeling boy that Titania has stolen. Titania will not give him up. Oberon takes revenge by sending Puck, his servant to find a magic flower whose juice Puck will sprinkle onto Titania's eyes while she is asleep. This will make her fall in love with the first person she sees upon waking.

Oberon, sees Demetrius reject Helena, and tells Puck to put the potion on Demetrius' eyes also. But Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, and Lysander wakes to see Helena, whom he falls in love with and chases after, leaving Hermia alone.

## Act III – Scene 1

The Mechanicals begin their rehearsal near where Titania is sleeping. Puck gives Bottom an ass's head. Bottom frightens his friends away waking Titania. She falls in love with him, and Bottom is treated like a Lord by the fairies.

## Act III – Scene 2

Hermia, having lost Lysander, thinks Demetrius has killed him, and when he denies it she goes to look for Lysander.

Oberon is furious with Puck for his mistake and tells him to find Helena and bring her to him. Oberon squeezes the flower onto Demetrius' eyes while he sleeps. Lysander enters with Helena, begging for her love, telling her Demetrius does not love her; Demetrius then wakes, sees Helena, and begs for her love. Hermia enters and is snubbed by Lysander, while Helena thinks all three are tricking her.

## Act 1 continued...

Oberon, sees Demetrius reject Helena. Oberon orders Puck to seek out Demetrius and make him fall in love with Helena with the aid of the same magic flower Puck had used for Tytania.

Meanwhile - The Rustics meet to discuss a play on the theme of Pyramus and Thisbe which they want to perform at Theseus' wedding. They plan to rehearse in the forest.

Lysander and Hermia lie down to sleep. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and sprinkles the juice onto Lysander's eyelids.

Demetrius appears, chased by Helena who he angrily abandons. Helena in despair sees Lysander and awakens him - under the spell he declares his love. Helena thinks he is making fun of her and runs off, and Lysander follows her leaving Hermia alone.

## Act II

The Rustics meet to rehearse. Puck, seeing them at work, decides to amuse himself by turning Bottom into an ass. At the sight of this strange and terrifying transformation, the others run off. Bottom sings to keep his courage up. Bottom's singing wakes Tytania, who immediately falls in love with Bottom.

Oberon is amused by Tytania falling in love with Bottom.

When Demetrius arrives, still in pursuit of Hermia he realises that Puck has made a mistake. Demetrius falls asleep, Oberon pours the juice on his eyes.

Helena and Lysander arrive, which awakens Demetrius who then declares his love for Helena. Hermia arrives, she is rejected by Lysander. Helena believes the two men have planned it to mock her. The four quarrel furiously.

Oberon angered by Puck's mistake orders him to give the antidote to Lysander. Puck follows the lovers and puts the antidote on Lysander's eyes.

### **Act IV – Scene 1**

Demetrius and Lysander challenge each other to a duel. Oberon gets Puck to imitate the two men's voices, leading them around until they fall asleep. Puck puts an antidote on Lysander's eyes so that he resumes his love for Hermia.

Oberon releases Titania from her spell, having taken the changeling boy from her. Puck removes the ass's head from Bottom.

Theseus and Hippolyta arrive to hunt in the forest, along with Egeus, where they discover the sleeping lovers. They hear their story, and Theseus decrees they shall be married as they wish, despite Egeus' will.

### **Act IV – Scene 2**

Bottom is reunited with his friends, and they rehearse their play.

### **Act V – Scene 1**

After supper, Theseus chooses their play, which is presented in front of an audience of all the lovers. They all retire to bed, and Oberon and Titania enter to sing and dance; Oberon, Titania and the fairies bless the sleeping household, and Puck is left to have the last word.

### **Act III**

Just before dawn, Oberon releases Tytania from the spell. At dawn the four lovers awaken – they are finally reconciled.

- Demetrius with Helena
- Lysander with Hermia

Bottom awakens, restored to his human shape, and believes he has just had a bad dream. Bottom wanders off and eventually finds his friends, to be told their play has been chosen to be performed at the wedding.

The four lovers return to ask forgiveness. Theseus forgives them and decides they shall be married together when he marries Hippolyta.

The Rustics finally give their performance, the three couples retire to bed, Oberon, Tytania and the fairies bless the sleeping household; and Puck is left to have the last word.